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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two programs that work together to meet the educational needs of at-risk secondary students in small rural schools in Queensland, Australia. The goal of the Students At Risk program (STAR) is to increase retention rates of identified at-risk students. The Priority Country Areas Program (PCAP) assists schools and community groups with improving educational participation and learning outcomes for disadvantaged students restricted by geographic isolation. To qualify for program funding, schools must submit information on retention rates as well as strategies for identifying at-risk students and proposed interventions. The St. George School in rural Queensland is an example of how both programs have provided resources in meeting the educational needs of rural students. STAR funding has allowed the employment of an Aboriginal home-school liaison officer who is responsible for contacting families, encouraging parental involvement, intervening when students experience problems, and providing in-class support for at-risk students. PCAP complements the work of STAR by providing a bus that introduces students to the wider world and allows them to participate in work experiences outside their community. As a result, student attendance rates have improved, a greater number of Aboriginal girls are completing their education, parents have become more involved, and retention rates have improved. At the Hughenden State School in rural Queensland, funding has been used to implement programs aimed at informing students of their postschool options, improving Year 10 students' basic skills to encourage their continuation to Year 12, and enhancing standard computer skills for all senior students. (LP)

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RC 020401

THE STUDENTS AT RISK PROGRAM (STAR) AND QUEENSLAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITHIN THE PRIORITY COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM (PCAP)

Paul Loney — Australia

Recent attention in social justice circles has centred on the educational issues associated with students subject to intersecting forms of disadvantage. The recent Ashenden and Milligan 'Review of Allocative Mechanisms for Commonwealth Equity funds for Schools', highlights this in recommending that,

> Ways be found to target more accurately multiple or intersecting forms of disadvantage including:
>
> - the intersection of poverty and NESB, and poverty and isolation;
> - increasing allocations to STAR;
> - reviewing other ways of targeting students who suffer multiple disadvantage - (p. xii)

This paper will briefly examine the coincidence of at-risk secondary students in two geographically isolated locations.

The Students at Risk and the Country Areas, General are both components of the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS). They provide for Queensland government schools in 1994 for STAR, $817000 and for Country Areas (PCAP in Queensland) $3099000. — See Table 1.

TABLE 1

PCAP SCHOOLS DESIGNATED AS STAR SCHOOLS 1994 FUNDS ALLOCATED 1994

SCHOOL	EDUCATION REGION	PCAP AREA	FUNDS ALLOCATED 1994
Collinsville	Northern	Northern	2625
Ravenshoe	Peninsula	Northern	2024
Cooktown	Peninsula	Northern	1 646

Moranbah	Capricornia	Central	6717
Cunnamulla	South Western	South West	2700
St George	South Western	South West	2700
Tara	South Western	South West	2700
Charleville SSC	South Western	South West	1 073
Hughenden	North Western	North West	2400
Longreach	North Western	North West	1 600
Winton	North Western	North West	1 600
TOTAL			27785

STAR has the objective of identifying those students most at risk of not completing secondary school and encouraging their continued participation — to complete secondary schooling with sound educational attainment. PCAP's objective is to assist schools and community groups to improve educational participation, learning outcomes and the personal development of students disadvantaged by restricted access to social, cultural and educational activities and services because of their geographic isolation. (Administrative Guidelines pp. 71,77).

Program Administration in Queensland

STAR

Funds are allocated to the eleven education regions on the basis of their Year 10 populations and specific populations in schools with retention to Year 12 below the state average. See Map 1. Map 1 is Queensland Education Regions. Regions then decide which schools will be invited to make submissions for consideration by a regional STAR committee. There are 76 government STAR schools. Proformas for submissions and educational and financial accountability are provided to schools. Regionally approved STAR programs are then collated centrally to ensure they meet STAR objectives and tally financially.

Accountability documents are held regionally. Copies are forwarded to DEET in Canberra. In summary, the regional role is critical to the process.

PCAP

PCAP is managed intersystemically in Queensland. Approximately 91% of the state's area is PCAP designated. School community proposals are considered within the four PCAP Areas; Northern, South West, North West and Central. See Map 2, Queensland PCAP Areas.

So the challenge within STAR is for schools to decide on the criteria for targeting the students perceived to be at risk and then to make appropriate interventions to enable their successful completion of secondary schooling.

In PCAP schools apparent retention to Year 12 in 1993 was 56% compared with nonPCAP schools at 78% and schools Statewide at 76%. These figures are of course affected by factors including migration, inter-sector and inter-school transfers. Certain PCAP schools do not offer post-compulsory years and students may complete their schooling at non-PCAP schools thus boosting those schools' apparent retention rates. (Taylor, 1993, 7, 8). In the case of PCAP schools then, retention is an important educational issue. It is interesting to note that though PCAP schools are generally smaller than other schools - 163 students on average for PCAP schools with secondary offerings compared with 696 for non PCAP secondary schools - their comparative subject offerings are not so startlingly contrasted at 36.9 and 46.5 subjects respectively, (Taylor, 1993, 7). One might surmise that most students could select an interesting combination of six subjects from 37 on offer at an 'average' PCAP school.

Regions usually decide that a certain school will be STAR - designated on the basis of local knowledge and specific information about schools' retention levels. Guidelines for proposals are provided and financial and educational accountability requirements outlined. Schools must then consider how to identify their at-risk students and decide if interventions should be specifically for those students at risk or involve some degree of whole school change. Specific responses to these questions are examined in the school studies below.

Two STAR/PCAP Schools

St George has a population of about 2200 and is in a cotton growing area 524 kilometres south west of Brisbane, 195 kilometres South of Roma. Its high school enrolment is approximately 240.

Hughenden State School provides schooling to Year 12. The town's population is similar to St George's with about 1900 and is located 1744 kilometres north west of Brisbane and 373km south west of Townsville in a wool, cattle and grain area.

Table 2 outlines the schools' levels of STAR funding in the last three years. Both centres are shown on maps 1 and 2.

TABLE 2

STAR FUNDING 1992-1994

SCHOOL	1992	1993	1994
Hughenden	2799	4700	2400
St George	21604	13000	2700

Teachers of St George High School outlined in their STAR proposal for 1993 '...low retention rates, very few female Aboriginal students are found in the senior school,the lack of valuing of education by many of the parents and problems of economic hardships'. A home-school liaison officer could contact families and encourage parental involvement, liaise concerning student problems and provide in class support for students at risk. The school felt an Aboriginal liaison officer could undertake home visits to Aboriginal families with a reasonable prospect of acceptance and trust.

At St George reduced funding has meant that the home-school liaison officer (HSLO) is now employed for ten hours weekly. Attendance rates have improved through all absences being followed up with parents; absences have fallen from 15% to 10%. One of the factors in education not being highly valued is the local availability of quite good unskilled work opportunities. The school reports, 'The most exciting part is getting the officer to work with at-risk students in class as a tutor across all year levels. This particularly relates to the school's vertical timetable which meets students' differing styles and rates of learning.

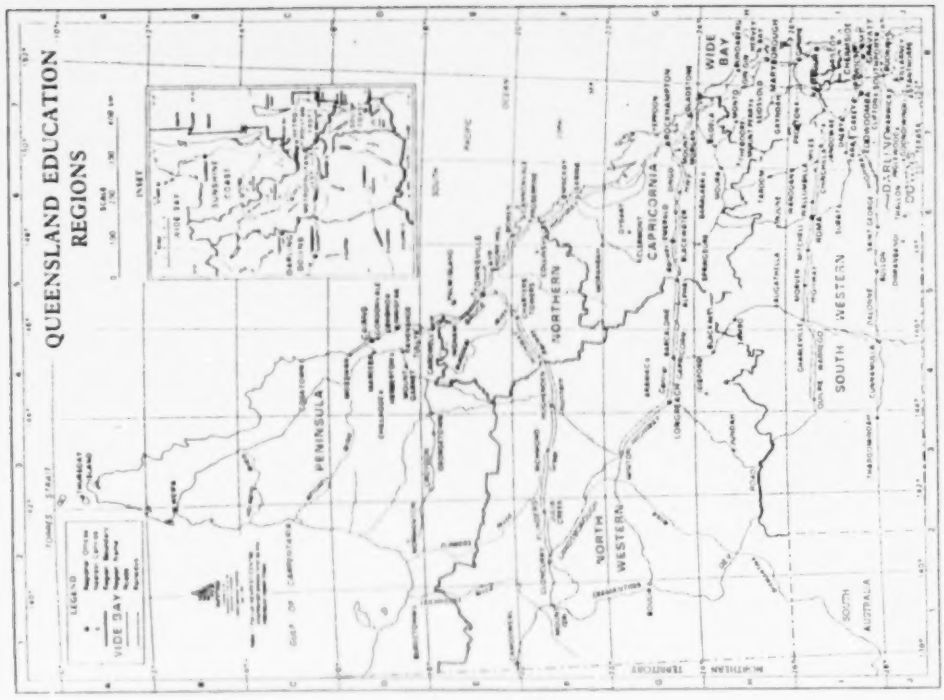
Students who would have left are staying on - the introduction in Years 11 and 12 of one day per week work experience has assisted here. Aboriginal girls are now completing their schooling. Aboriginal families who may have felt uncomfortable with teachers and administrators feel the HSLO is closer to them - an essential link between home and school. St George's Aboriginal population ranges between 16% and 20% so building these partnership is critical to students' success.

What is it that makes these students 'at risk'?

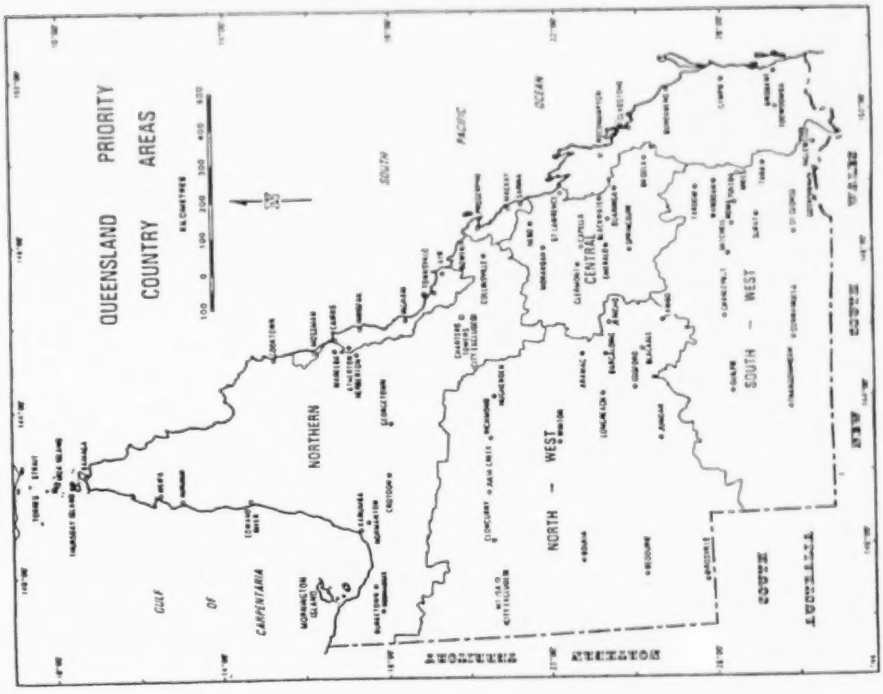
A sense of isolation and a perception that St George is the 'whole world' tend to make the challenge of striving to go on to further study, away from home, seem just too difficult. The immensity of a university in Brisbane, the complexity of urban transport systems can make it, 'very scary leaving'. It is here that PCAP is able to complement the work of STAR for these students. It helps, for example through the use of the PCAP bus, to introduce students to a wider world enhancing their valuing of education and the possibilities it can unfold. About the nineteen seat PCAP bus the school says, 'We use it to see the world.' It is shared on a half year each basis with Cunnamulla and certainly meets the need to broaden educational outcomes for students with limited resources. The school notes that, 'Students come to realise that if they have insufficient skills they run the risk of having little or no employment.'

What are the trends for senior students here? Retention is rising. At least 38 of the present 45 students in Year 10 are expected to proceed to Year 11. The HSLO has clearly proved to be invaluable — 'She has access to information and is seen to be a true member of the community'. Because of this she provides a continuity of support for the community's at risk students. In St George which has a very strong sense of community identity, this is particularly

MAP 1



MAP 2



important. Teachers are valued but as members of a statewide organisation, 'Teachers will never be locals'. Clearly the HSLO is a critical agent in developing genuine partnerships within the school community and enhancing outcomes for at risk students.

In 1992 Hughenden State School used STAR funds with the aims of:

- better informing students of their post-school options, particularly tertiary study;
- enhancing year 10 student's skills to encourage their continuation to Year 12;
- enhanced workplace standard computer skills for all senior students.

Again the school's recognition of the need to broaden student's post-school horizons is seen in the use of funds for educational experiences beyond Hughenden - in 1992 to several tertiary institutions and employers in Townsville (Year 12) and a careers market in Charters Towers (Year 10).

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At Hughenden the students are recognised as having high post-school risk potential. There is a high level of years 10 to 11 retention yet the school sees the students having risks related to their geographic isolation; the students are less familiar with the range of post-school employment and training possibilities. They may see less relevance in their schooling and be motivationally at risk as they note people succeeding in local employment with limited schooling backgrounds.

Hughenden offers 'a good range of subjects' and has tracked the 18 Year 12 leavers of 1992. Nine had stayed in Hughenden, two-three had gone to tertiary education. None was unemployed.

For the future Hughenden intends to continue with its vocational excursions to Townsville with links to James Cook University, TAFE, the CES, Pimlico State High School, major employers such as K-Mart and the copper refinery. They intend to expand Years 11 and 12 options with vocational modules and a curriculum which is very practical and oriented towards students' futures'. STAR funds can assist here in making the senior years attractive and appropriate to ability levels.

Interestingly the view of 'escape' being necessary for success is being questioned in Hughenden. While there is value in study or employment away for a period, the community needs the enrichment of its educated youth and the school is aware that there may be less local competition for employment. In the rural community there may be greater emphasis placed on one's personal background. Hughenden has 270 students. Their circumstances are known and understood by the school. Again the PCAP bus is seen to be of great importance, in providing bus transport 'we live and die with it.' Its role is strategic in achieving the school's aim of '... getting kids successful results at the end of their schooling'.

Before leaving these two case studies of schools hundreds of kilometres apart it is their similarities of concern for the best attainment and set of options for their students which stand out. Their approaches differ, while both seek to strengthen student's understanding of the larger world beyond, they also respect and seek partnership with the local community. In both, a positive conjunction of PCAP and STAR aims and resources occurs to meet the uniquely rural educational needs of students.

A STAR seminar (Townsville, 1993) identified issues which relate directly to these two case studies. Participants noted that:

- schools needed more than a one year period STAR-funded to allow them to achieve more;
- that program overlap e.g. PCAP, STAR, occurs because students may experience multiple, intersecting disadvantage.

Important STAR criteria included students' home socio-economic status, schools' retention rates and juvenile offending. What contributes to our students being at-risk? Important factors include economic, motivation (appropriateness of the curriculum) early pregnancy, itinerancy, peer influences and family crisis.

Teachers are highly skilled in identifying at-risk students and equally concerned about enabling students to complete their schooling with optimal outcomes. Nationally, Country Areas Program (NATCAP) projects are being undertaken to enhance secondary schooling in geographically isolated areas. Approximately $9 million in the 1993-95 period has supported an array of initiatives many of which are already proving highly successful in fields including curriculum development, distance careers and vocational education. In geographically isolated schools linkages between STAR and PCAP are already assisting in bringing about measurable improvements in students' completion of secondary schooling - with enlarged post-school options and improved life chances.

Hughenden and St George schools show the links across PCAP and STAR and are overlapping of support for at-risk and geographically isolated students. There is an exciting challenge here to seek the synergies which come from sharing expertise to meet the needs of all students. The Commonwealth encourages this more accurate targeting of students with intersecting disadvantage and these two brief studies signal important future directions.

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